

Public Opinion on Iraq

The Use of Historical Documents

PENELOPE TUSON

In June 1920 a British Member of Parliament asked the Prime Minister in the House of Commons whether it was the Government's intention "to withdraw its troops from Mesopotamia as soon as it has been developed as a self-governing state, able to stand by itself." The brief and non-committal reply, carefully drafted by government officials, was that troops would be withdrawn "as soon as the condition of the country permits."¹ A few months earlier the London Times had complained in an editorial that taxpayers' money was being "squandered in the region of the Tigris and the Euphrates," without any coordinated planning for the future of the country. It was time, said the editorial, for the Government to give an account of its "stewardship," not only in Mesopotamia, but throughout the Middle East.²

As a "counterblast" to these criticisms, the British Government decided to publish a thorough and "easy to read" review of their administration in Iraq, to "show the good work accomplished" during the British occupation since the capture of Basra in 1914. It would highlight civic achievements to counteract the bad news of the disastrous military campaign up to the fall of Baghdad in 1917. And it would clarify British intentions after the Armistice in Europe in November 1918. The review was compiled by British civil and military officials serving in Iraq but it was edited for publication by Gertrude Bell, then "Oriental Secretary" to the British Civil Commissioner and one of the few women ever to occupy such a position in imperial politics. Bell was widely travelled in the region and she was one of the most knowledgeable British officials. She was also to become the most sympathetic to Arab nationalist aspirations. Her review was thorough and wide-ranging and it included a summary history of Iraq under Ottoman rule and an analysis of British policy on revenue, agriculture, irrigation, law, tribal affairs, and much else. The acting Civil Commissioner, Arnold Wilson, thought the publication would be useful for "moulding public opinion at home and abroad."

The "Review of the Civil Administration of Mesopotamia" was published as a Parliamentary *Blue Book* in December 1920. Earlier in the year, at San Remo, Britain was assigned the Mandate to govern the newly-unified region of Iraq and the following March, at the Cairo Conference, Faysal bin Husayn was appointed as the future King. Britain remained in Iraq until its independence in 1932.

Western involvement in the Muslim world

It is tempting and perhaps facile to talk about learning lessons from history. But it is sometimes hard to read archival sources and not wonder whether history does indeed repeat itself. In 1919 and 1920 a vigorous and often acrimonious discussion took place within the British government about the future and political prospects of the new Iraq. Outside Whitehall there was also a vociferous and well-informed public debate. Much of this argument can now be read in the British Library in the archives of the former India Office.³ The public protests, political responses and subtle interventions of officials and diplomats seem eerily resonant in the context of more recent events. British archival sources on the period after the First World War are full of arguments stemming from conflicting interests and attitudes towards the political and economic importance of the region and the cultural and religious

It is sometimes hard not to read archival sources and wonder whether history does indeed repeat itself. In 1919 and 1920 a vigorous discussion took place within the British government about the future and political prospects of the new Iraq. Outside Whitehall there was also a vociferous and well-informed public debate. Much of this argument can now be read in the British Library in the archives of the former India Office.

consequences of Western involvement in the Muslim world.

Over the past two decades colonial (or imperial) history and archives have rightly been reappraised as primary sources. We accept that colonial archives by definition reflect the interests and perspectives of the people who produced them. They are often, with some justification, dismissed as white, masculine, and militaristic. In a

very important sense they present a skewed and limited vision of the past, silencing people and activities which were marginal to the colonial project. Historians, however, neglect them at their peril. The India Office Records cover over three centuries, from the earliest East India Company trading contacts with Asia to the end of Empire in India in 1947. They contain voluminous information on British interests in India and the wider world of Asia, encompassing a vast proportion of the Muslim world. They include files on British policy towards post-1918 Iraq as well as on British involvement in the region during the previous three hundred years. More importantly, as Gertrude Bell's Review illustrates so well, their very determination to exercise power and influence prompted colonial officials to gather, sift and record as much local information as possible. Working on the assumption that "knowledge is power" they were tireless in their acquisition of linguistic fluency, their intelligence gathering, and their attention to detail.

The archives of the British Indian Empire are unrivalled in their scope and detail as well as in the excitement, recognition and insight they can produce in the reader. They do not teach lessons. But it might be argued that the reports produced at the beginning of the last century contain a range and depth of knowledge which should be required reading for the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. British Library (India Office Records), IOR: L/P&S/10/759
2. *Times* (London), August 14, 1919, IOR:L/P&S/10/752
3. The India Office Records are now part of the Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections of the British Library.

Penelope Tuson is former Curator of Middle East Archives in the British Library. She is author of *Playing the Game: Western Women in Arabia* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2003) and Editor, with Anthony Farrington, of IDC Publishers collections of British Colonial Policy and Intelligence Files on Asia and the Middle East (For more information contact info@idc.nl). E-mail: pjtuson@aol.com